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### 2025 National Japan Bowl Level 4 Experience

Competing in this year's National Japan Bowl in D.C. was an experience I'll never forget. We started off strong with a Japanese dinner on the day we arrived, which was the day prior to the start of Japan Bowl. It wasn't even a purposeful choice. We were hungry, it was close, and it had food available to satisfy all of our assorted dietary restrictions. It was a cute Mom and Pop shop, and everyone was full and satisfied by the end.

The next day, we got up early to walk the national mall. I'll return to this later, but it was a very fun experience. Finally, it was time to actually head to the Japan Bowl. While in line for registration, we saw members from teams we met last year and eagerly caught up with each other. It's amazing to think that I've actually met and made friends with people all the way across the country through Japan Bowl!

Our team also did some quick reviewing in the leadup to the question rounds, which were very fun. Honestly, they made me realize how much I need to work on my listening skills. A lot of the questions were listening based, and I found myself getting lost. I've decided to try and focus on this skill, as I'm going to Japan this summer and it's so crucial for communication. We also got to learn a lot about Osaka Expo through the answer review sessions—and through a surprise visit from a special guest! We got to meet Myaku Myaku, Osaka Expos' mascot, and take fun pictures with them. (Hopefully, the National Japan Bowl organization will share some of these pictures). I enjoyed this moment because I find the character very cute, but also because it channeled that vibe of fun and whimsy that I always feel is encouraged at the Japan Bowl. I really appreciate how much this event is made to be enjoyable and encouraging.

Another really fun part of Japan Bowl was the haiku contest. All participating teams were asked to create a haiku because of this year's cultural topic, but we weren't told there would be a contest until we got there. It was fun to look at everyone's creations, and to guess which haiku our friends had written. I was super impressed by some of the language used by other teams, and I was genuinely moved by at least one of them. Generally, I really enjoyed the topic of haiku this year and some of the questions asked at the national level taught me information I never would have learned otherwise.

One other portion of the National Japan Bowl I'd like to talk about was the cultural workshops. This year, I chose to go to the kendama and tea ceremony workshops. I was very impressed by the selection of different options Japan Bowl offered, but the moment I saw kendama I knew I had to go. The instructor taught us all sorts of moves, from the most basic cup catches to swings and juggles. My teammates and I had so much fun at this workshop. There was more technique to the game than I thought, and I ended up being much better at catching the ball at the end of the workshop than I had been at the beginning. I'm actually going to ask for a kendama for Christmas because I enjoyed the workshop so much. The tea ceremony was equally enthralling, as we got the opportunity to appreciate cool tea cups, whisk matcha, and have little treats to go along with it. It actually gave me a greater appreciation for the drink of matcha, which I've always thought was too bitter for me.

To wrap up my story, I'd like to return to our adventures around the national mall on Friday. Our hotel was only a fifteen minute walk from the capitol building, and from the capitol to the main venue it was even closer. This meant that we could take advantage of some time before the Japan Bowl started on Friday to explore some of the amazing museums around. We got to visit an art gallery and a botanical garden! Then, on Saturday, D.C. was incredibly busy.

Multiple political protests and a 5k occurred during our time at the venue, and I felt like I was learning more about both Japan and America. That's one thing I've appreciated about the opportunity of competing in the National Japan Bowl especially: though the event is centered around Japan, it's really about appreciating and forming a bond between American and Japanese cultures. I love that I got to learn about both Japan and my own country from this experience.

Overall, my feelings are bittersweet. I've appreciated the Japan Bowl so much, but it's time for my team and I to move on. Thank you so much to everyone who made this event and our trip possible! I made friends and memories that I'll keep with me as I continue my study of Japanese in college. □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □